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**Failure in welfare partnerships -a gender hypothesis:  
Reflections on a serendipity pattern in LSCBs**

**Abstract**

This paper examines the role that gender bias in the welfare professions plays in persistent failures in inter-agency and inter-professional collaborations. Drawing from a case study of a Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) in England, a 'serendipity pattern' of gender dominance is identified within professions affecting inter-professional collaborations such as those prevalent in LSCBs. The intellectual debate to which this paper contributes is around cultural barriers to inter-professional collaborations. The findings also indicate that policy measures taken to augment the effectiveness of welfare partnerships have, so far, paid insufficient attention to the critical variable of gender, due to over-emphasis on the organisations, rather than the professions, involved. The paper's contribution to practice is unravelling the potential of this oversight to contribute to failure to establish a collaborative mind-set. By way of further research, we offer some empirical evidence of the 'gender hypothesis' in welfare partnerships and indicate how investigations might be pursued in this area.

Keywords: LSCBs, serendipity pattern, culture, gender, professions, partnerships, welfare

## Introduction

Partnership working has been ‘in vogue’ since the late 1980s (Hudson, 1987) and has been promoted by numerous government reforms in the past two decades in most OECD countries. Despite becoming a long-established paradigm in public service delivery and not without its challenges and critics, it is still seen as a pre-requisite for effective policy design and delivery. The UK, in particular, is home to a plethora of alliances for public policy formulation and delivery. An important example of such an alliance is the UK Every Child Matters (ECM) policy programme<sup>1</sup> (DfES 2004, HMSO 2004, HM Government 2006). This programme aims to deliver integrated services by introducing a statutory requirement for ‘mandated joined-up working’ (Barton and Quinn, 2001) whereby relevant local welfare agencies work together and coordinate previously individual efforts to, for example, adapt national legislation to local needs, as well as to create their own local strategies within the wider policy scope of ‘safeguarding children’. These measures followed a number of infamous cases of service failure due to lack of communication between the relevant professions, often with tragic consequences (as, for example, in the case of Victoria Climbié – see Laming, 2003).

Despite the expectations that the imposition of a statutory duty to collaborate will make these partnerships more effective, the outcomes have been far from encouraging. Two years after the introduction of the ECM policy programme, the death of baby Peter (an 18-month-old baby whose abuse was left undetected by Haringey Council professionals, despite several points of contact with numerous welfare agencies - see Ofsted, Healthcare Commission and HMIC, 2008) further exposed inherent obstacles to communication between organisations, despite the ECM having introduced new institutional mechanisms precisely to tackle them. More recently, the Daniel Pelka’s (Lock 2013) and the Philpott family’s cases (Johnston, 2014) brought these issues back to the fore of public scrutiny.

What the public perceived as policy failure needs to be scrutinised in the light of literature suggesting, for example, that there are ‘gradients’ to failure (e.g. McConnell’s (2015) tolerable,

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<sup>1</sup> Under the UK coalition government (2010-15), the policy area and the policy context have changed, although many of the structures introduced by ECM (including the LSCBs) remain.

conflicted and outright failure framework) and that failure is rarely objective, but rather is ‘in the eyes of the beholder’ or, at best, midway between the two, in the eyes of the stakeholders (Zittoun, 2015). Where the public is a stakeholder, child deaths following miscommunication between local government agencies, even when they are isolated cases (i.e. even when they fall in McConnell’s category of ‘tolerability’), can lead to programme failure which can be followed, more or less directly, by political failure. To prevent such outcomes, the policy goes through alterations but deeper, cultural roots of the poor inter-professional communication in inter-agency partnerships are not a quick fix so they typically are left to one side (e.g. Hudson 2009). Recognising the difficulty, and perhaps reticence, to address power differentials in such collaborations, O’Flynn (2013) and Carey and Dickinson (2015) alert us to the danger of using ‘collaboration’ as a buzz-word, ‘as a dress-up of the same old problems and ways of working’ if we do not engage more thoroughly with critical issues such as power differentials rooted in gender inequity in public sector workforces. To counteract this possibility, there is a need to account for the plurality of interests and voices in public collaborations (O’Flynn 2013).

Cultural discrepancies between the professions interacting in child protection alliances have been extensively explored in the literature, albeit with different research foci to ours: communication between health professionals (see Allen 1997, Blattel-Mink and Kuhlman 2003), between social workers and nurses (for example, Mullaney and Liston 1974), between primary care and social work professionals (for example, Rummery and Coleman 2002) and between social services, police and health occupations (for example, Reder and Duncan 2003). Amongst the issues identified as contributing to poor communication channels are a lack of trust between the professionals, cultural misalignment, and a tendency to try to take exclusive ownership of issues. What we add to this body of literature is mainly the argument that the apparent cultural dissonance between welfare professions is also due to a certain ‘gendered disposition’ (Annesley et al. 2010). This is currently insufficiently addressed by the literature on inter-professional public sector partnerships, although O’Flynn’s (2013) and Carey and Dickinson’s (2015) efforts to open research pathways in these directions are

noteworthy. Therefore, our gender hypothesis posits that gender segregation can help explain the cultural dissonance in interorganisational partnerships like the LSCBs. Indeed, the unique focus of this paper is on gender segregation in the professions. The latter is a level regularly overlooked by welfare reforms (in their quest for solutions at an organisational level-an aspect also observed by Hudson (2009)) and that can explain the persistence of gender inequity in public sector organisations which have strong professional groups at their core.

In unravelling this ‘gender hypothesis’, the paper contributes to ongoing debates around ‘hidden’ cultural barriers to inter-professional collaborations (Molyneux 2001, Hall 2005, Gittel et al. 2013, O’Flynn 2013, Carey and Dickinson 2015) in public sector welfare partnerships. By taking a cultural approach to professions (in a similar way to Aaltio-Marjosola 1994, Gherardi 1995) but also to inter-professional collaborations (Van de Ven 1975), we argue that more needs to be done in terms of gendering policies in welfare professions. Until cultural alignment towards ‘a flattened hierarchy with equality, respect and mutual understanding for the other members of the team’ (Kneale 1994) is achieved, the effectiveness of collaborative work may be compromised (ibid). The creation of a cultural melting pot is important for collaborative structures, as it prevents members from ‘pulling apart’ on grounds of cultural dissonance (Lupton et al. 2001). The ‘compatibility of linkages’ between agencies has also been raised by Whetten (1981) and, more recently, by O’Flynn (2013) and it is claimed to pose the biggest threat to mandatory partnerships (Barton and Quinn, 2001) such as the LSCBs. Further research has been called for by Meier and colleagues (2006) to decipher gender-influenced relational work in organisations, and by O’Flynn (2013) and Carey and Dickinson (2015) to unravel what lies behind the ‘collaborations’ mantra in terms of critical issues such as power differentials rooted in gender inequity in and across organisations. This paper addresses these gaps directly.

Our arguments unfold in a somewhat untraditional fashion: it starts with a theoretical background of gender, gender equity / inequity and why it matters in professions and organisations; it then gives centrality to methodological ‘serendipity’ and taking the reader through the specific

serendipity pattern of ‘gender’ which emerged from our research of a mandated partnership setting - an English LSCB; it then assigns this patterns a ‘strategic interpretation’ in line with Merton’s (1948) theory. The article concludes with points of contribution to both theory and practice, alongside an outline of future research avenues.

## **Gender matters**

Despite the decrease in the tendency of certain professions to be dominated by one sex - for example, female nurses and male doctors - (Horman et al. 1987), the issue still persists, particularly for the caring professions (see, for example, McKie et al. 2001).

Gender is conceptualized here, in accordance with current theories (e.g. Martin 1994, Anker 1998, Browne 2006) to represent a social construct, rather than a biological given. It refers to differences between masculinity and femininity as determined by social and cultural values and behaviours. Although our interpretation of ‘gender’ comes from a social constructionist perspective (Burr 1995), we do, however, recognize a partial overlap between ‘gender’ and ‘sex’. This is explained by the fact that changes in organisational cultures and behaviours, through what has been termed ‘substantive representation’, is often preceded by ‘descriptive’ representation, an increase in the simple numerical representation of women in institutions (Beveridge et al. 2000, Keiser et al. 2002, Lovenduski 2005, Mackay, 2005, Meier and Nicholson-Crotty 2006, Phillips, 1995, Kelly and Newman 2004).

The basis for these claims lays in the theory of representative bureaucracy (e.g. Kelly and Newman 2001) which essentially predicates that the gender and race composition of a public bureaucracy affects their relations with, and their work effectiveness on, public service users and public policy beneficiaries (e.g. Miller and McTavish 2014). This theory has been extended over the years to include specific conditions in which ‘passive’ turns into ‘active’ representation. Such conditions were identified by Wilkins and Keiser (2004) to be a) the existence of discretion for

bureaucrats and b) that the policy area is salient for the demographic characteristic on which representation is sought. We could argue that both conditions are met for bureaucracies with child protection remits, given that they have professionals at their core who are said to enjoy professional discretion (Evetts 2002) and that their clientele group is gendered (e.g. Lowi 1995) hence likely to see child protection arrangements as very important.

The theory of representative bureaucracy came about partly due to concerns around public bureaucracies being the domain of masculinity (e.g. Stivers 2002, Johnston Miller and McTavish 2014). This was not the case only in public organisations, having been raised before in relation to private corporations (e.g. Maier 1999) and having been explained through ‘hegemonic forms of masculinity present in the wider society’ (Morgan 1996, p. 47). The categorization of feminine and masculine organisations come from Maier’s (1999) arguments around gendered practices which embody ‘values, characteristics, and qualities more commonly associated with one sex than the other’ (p. 3). Maier (1999) draws on Rothchild’s (1992) ‘feminine model of organising’ and Ferguson’s (1991) ‘feminist organizational structure’ when he claims that these gendered processes reflect and reinforce conceptions of masculinity or femininity, such as masculine focus on tasks and competition versus the feminine focus on people and cooperation.

In terms of how exactly these patterns of dominance have extended in organisations, this could be explained through social psychology notions of ‘similarity-attraction’ (Moreno 1943, Newcomb 1943) and ‘social contract’ (Blau 1977, Kanter 1997) perspectives of group gender composition and work group relations (Talbert et al. 1999) according to which easily visible demographic characteristics such as sex can be used as indexes of similarity, forming majority groups in which minority members experience social isolation and social constraints in social interactions.

These theoretical strands help explain occupational sex segregation (Jacobs 1999) –or occupational gender segregation (Guy and Newman 2004)- whereby certain occupations are over-populated by women, whereas others, by men. In his study of occupational segregation, Jacobs (1999) described it across three dimensions: the degree to which men and women are distributed unevenly

across occupational fields, the crowding of women into a limited number of fields and the degree of intergroup contact or the probability of interaction on the job. Jacobs's prediction for the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that occupational segregation is likely to persist due to a very slow rate of decline. This prediction was likely shared by others, given the accumulation of research after the turn of the century. Indeed, occupational, or horizontal (Guy and Newman 2004), segregation, started to be explored in relation to more sophisticated frameworks, such as emotional labour (Horsechild 1984), which some jobs, such as teaching (Guy and Newman 2004), entail, and which Meier and colleagues (2006) claim to be gendered in nature. Then, from an economics angle, Kerr and colleagues (2002) looked at occupational segregation as a manifestation of the 'gendered economy' based on segmented labour market theory (e.g. Kerr et al. 2002). More recently, feminist scholars have developed the concept of feminist institutionalism which appears directly relevant to our study, as an alternative explanation of the creation and spreading of gender segregation in the professions. Crook and Mackay (2015) fused institutionalist theory around the culture and rules of organisations with a feminist perspective. In posing questions such as: "Why do institutions often reproduce or exacerbate patterns of disadvantage and discrimination, even when formally espousing ideals of equality?", their research reveals how seemingly neutral (and 'invisible') structures and mechanisms for exercising power within institutions predicate male dominance especially with regard to values, thus replicating traditional patterns of authority and influence (Mackay and Waylen, 2014, Johnston Miller and McTavish 2014). This also poses challenges to the usual conceptualisations of path dependency.

We can extend this arguments around occupation segregation to the professions, given that these are well-established occupations which had the time and opportunity to develop strong identities associated with complex skills, long period of socialization both to acquire those complex skills and to buy into the professional culture and develop a certain identity of a 'professional' (e.g. Ackroyd 1996).

## **Gender matters in the professions**



It is barely coincidental that the professions often associated with horizontal gender segregation are also old, traditional professions -doctors, nurses, social workers, teachers and police officers. These have acquired, over time, a strong social profile and have had the opportunity to separate from both lay people and other professional communities (Goode 1957, Ackroyd 1996). This 'occupational double closure' (Parkin 1972, Murphy 1988) is, in essence, a double ideological separation of professions from 'others'. Indeed, they have come to 'occupy specific, and often strategically powerful, enclaves within large organisations, within which they can be recognized as organisationally encapsulated quasi-organisations' (Ackroyd 1996, pp. 601). Hence, the five main professional groups involved in the ECM programme are at the very core of the organisations which formally employ them, and thus get to drive organisational aims and objectives.

However, there are status differences between these professions, as some are held in higher public regard than others. A common dichotomy used by sociologists of professions is that of 'pure', versus 'semi' or emerging, professions (Etzioni 1969, Simpson and Simpson 1969), to differentiate between the professionals who enjoy more autonomy from those who enjoy considerably less autonomy. 'Pure' professions are the least bureaucratic, require longer training and create and apply, rather than communicate knowledge. A classic example of a pure profession is medicine where the bureaucratic procedures for doctors are kept to a minimum and are designed by their peers, where training is typically long and requires continuous updating, and where the knowledge they tackle is typically one which they apply directly on their patients rather than communicate to their superiors or to other professionals (Etzioni 1969). In contrast, 'semi'-professionals lack the full professional autonomy of the former and are subjected to a considerably larger body of rules and regulations governing their work, requiring shorter training and communicating, rather than creating or applying knowledge (ibid). A typical example of a semi-profession (sometimes labelled 'emerging' or 'administrative') is that of social work, which requires considerably shorter training than medicine and has its knowledge base closer to 'common sense' than to science, it is claimed (Abbott and Meerabeau 1998).

The ECM/LSCB professions are polarized between semi-professions (social work, nursing, teaching and police) and pure professions (medicine) (e.g. Etzioni 1969, Hearn 1982). Whilst the example of police personnel does not satisfy the criteria for inclusion under the ‘pure’ professional category, it does, however, sit apart from the other ‘semi-professions’. Police work lacks long training, a specific body of ‘professional’ police knowledge and work autonomy for its members (Cain 1972). Nevertheless, it is well-equipped, well-trained, and largely self-controlled (Etzioni 1969, Simpson 1985). These distinctions around status are significant as they are found to underpin interactions in partnerships. One aspect that makes this polarization ‘visible’ is that the typical ‘pure’ professional is male, whereas the typical ‘semi-professional’ is female (Etzioni 1969, Hearn 1982, Bolton and Muzio 2008). This underlines another gender dimension to the inter-professional interactions in this policy area.

If we accept that individual representatives in a partnership are conveyors of their professional identity (Evans 1997) and this is seen to be gendered, then the individuals come to ‘speak’ gender in ways which can either reinforce, or flatten, stereotypes of the type described by Horman et al (1987) in relation to the nursing and the medical professions:

*‘The image of the nursing profession...is pervasively linked to its predominantly female composition. As individuals, nurses are described as warm, loving, compassionate, and emotional, and their primary duties are perceived as stereotypically feminine... The image of the physician is also influenced by gender stereotypes. Historically, the medical profession has been overwhelmingly male, and the performance of the physician’s role has been stereotypically male’ (p. 848).*

Whilst generalizing, stereotypes are a reminder that at the bottom of organisational analysis are the people who contribute (with their inherent subjectivity) to forcing and reinforcing stereotypes. In the case of the LSCBs, we suggest that they do so through intensive interplay of professional identities. Hence, for a welfare partnership in perpetual crisis (e.g. Dudau and McAllister 2010, Dudau et al. 2016), gendered professions may be a contributing factor to this crisis. And if the difficulty to reach an effective integration of the professional cultures at the heart

of these partnerships can be blamed for the successive serious case reviews of children falling through the child protection net in Britain, then achieving that cultural melting pot is essential to avoiding policy failure, and consequently, effective, sustainable collaboration, a real challenge for contemporary public management. It could be argued to be connected with the challenges which Carey and Dickinson (2015) propose to address with help from feminist theory.

### **Gender: a ‘serendipity pattern’ in LSCBs**

This paper’s focus on gender emerged from a wider study into catalysts and barriers to partnership working based on an investigation of LSCBs comprising representatives of organisations and professions providing services for children and families. In line with Merton’s (1948) ‘serendipity pattern’ theory, the findings of that wider study indicated a potentially significant, yet so far hidden, variable in inter-organisational management; then, an exploration of the secondary data on gender bias in welfare professions, coupled with a thorough literature incursion into the concepts of gender and professionalism, gave way to a ‘strategic interpretation of that pattern: a gender hypothesis of failure in welfare partnership working.

Data around collaborative (inter-organisational, inter-professional) working was collected through ethnographic methods (two years of participant and non-participant observation of an LSCB in North-West England) as well as interviews with professionals involved in this particular LSCB. The research revealed that the individual professionals (rather than their professional bodies or their organisations) involved were essential to the success of the partnerships (Authors 2016). At the same time, however, it revealed an unexpected element of the inter-personal interaction: a gendered discourse, gender segregation and stereotyping, all appearing to contribute to barriers in communication within the partnership.

The first instance in which the authors were prompted in this direction came from an interviewee who was asked to recall examples of cultural misalignment with LSCB partners and who

offered the example of a Child Protection Conference meeting where the police officer (male) asked the social worker (woman) to make him a cup of tea. This example was used by the interviewee to illustrate some of the more subtle but inherent difficulties in partnership working. The very fact that this was used to contribute to a conceptually wider discussion is, we think, revealing as to the potential importance of the gender dimension within welfare partnerships such as the LSCBs. The issue of gender was seen to be intimately connected to that of inter-personal dynamics in partnerships – indeed, the incident exemplified was allegedly followed by an open inter-personal exchange that brought the meeting to a hasty end. There is some evidence from new approaches to feminist methodologies and epistemologies as to how relatively minor incidents like this, conveyed in an anecdotal manner can, nevertheless, be powerful illustrations of deeper ‘truths’ (Sprague, 2005).

To reiterate, gender was not a key variable at the start of our investigation. The anecdotal evidence emerging from that one interview occurred again and was then further prompted other interviews (see Annex). The ethnographic content analysis (Tesch 1990) which was applied to the data emerging from both our interviews and our observations allowed us to pay attention to the variables emerging at various stages of the study to essentially guide our understanding of the data at subsequent stages. Ethnographic content analysis is a type of content analysis involving a great degree of interpretation of the textual units of analysis in accordance with the organisational culture that the ethnographer(s) perceived during their fieldwork. It relies on coding and on categorizing, just like content analysis, but the categories for coding words and phrases are not fixed; rather, they are allowed to emerge gradually throughout the study (Altheide 1987).

Alongside the interviews, the observational element of the study revealed additional evidence for the ‘gender’ hypothesis: that the dynamics between people were seen to be affected by their perceived compliance with the gender bias of each profession. Thus, amongst the four police representatives to both the executive and the strategic LSCB boards in the area, the only one perceived by LSCB colleagues as ‘collaborative’ (one interview question asked the 20 respondents to identify their most and least collaborative partners, and their answers were then triangulated by observation

of collaborative work at the LSCB meetings) was openly critical to the male culture dominance in mainstream police work (referring to the ‘macho’ culture in her profession and to the fact that child protection did not sit well with this type of culture). Conversely, the only social care representative who was perceived to be a ‘reluctant partner’ was a social worker who was seen as standing against the ‘feminine’ culture of their organisation. Finally, non-participant observation of the LSCB meetings following the departure of a male LSCB chair witnessed his leadership being challenged for being too ‘firm’- no similar claim was made about the leadership of the female LSCB chair who followed. The Annex table centralises these distinct pieces of evidence.

While these do not, in themselves, serve as evidence of gender disconnect, they reveal a variable of inter-professional collaboration which our research went on to suggest was beyond accidental. To strengthen our claims, we propose that the ‘gender hypothesis’ we put forward represents what Merton (1948) referred to as ‘serendipity pattern’: an observed ‘unanticipated, anomalous and strategic datum which becomes the occasion for developing a new theory or for extending an existing theory’ (Merton 1948, p. 506). It is what quantitative research sometimes refers to as a ‘latent’ or ‘hidden’ variable.

‘Serendipity patterns’ have been connected with case studies, particularly those of an ethnographic nature (Snow and Anderson, 1991) due to the fact that the latter tend to start with broad research questions (in our case, the exploration of barriers and catalysis to partnership work for children and families in England and Wales). Merton’s (1948) characteristics of serendipity patterns include the fact that they are unexpected, surprising, findings to which the investigator brings a ‘strategic interpretation’. The ‘gender’ variable in our investigation was surprising, as it was not in our initial interview protocol; the only questions which could have prompted the respondents to speak about gender were (1) to reflect on issues which, in their view, represent barriers to collaborative work in the LSCB, (2) to reflect on potential catalysis to collaborative work in their LSCB and (3) to indicate who their ‘collaborative’ and ‘reluctant’ partners were. These questions, as well as our theoretical sensitivity at the outset of the ethnographic research, were

informed by our review of the literature on welfare partnerships, in which gender is not a prominent variable. This ‘absence’ is another argument that supports our claim that gender is indeed a ‘hidden’ variable for our purposes. As the case for the ‘serendipitous’ quality of the ‘gender hypothesis’ has been made, the discussion develops next into the ‘strategic interpretation’ (Merton 1948) of this variable in the context of inter-organisational and inter-professional collaborations.

To do so, we look at secondary data to explore the effect of gender on collaborations to establish the link between the social and the biological constructions of ‘gender’ and explain their partial overlap. This quantitative data was analysed qualitatively in light of Hakim’s (1993) thresholds for what constitutes ‘gendered’ professions. The results are suggestive of an intra-professional bias with implications for joined-up welfare service delivery. These results are interpreted in relation to the professional composition of LSCBs and further literature-based evidence on additional characteristics of those professionals as well as in relation to gender segregation, gender bias and the notion of representation. While this theoretical body of the paper is given at the start, it has been developed after the emergence of the ‘gender’ pattern from the data, alongside the development of an argument for strategic interpretation through secondary data.

### **Pressure points for gender in LSCBs –a strategic interpretation of our serendipity pattern?**

LSCB interactions are inter-organisational, inter-professions and inter-personal (Currie et al. 2008, Dudau et al. 2016). The inter-professional dynamics are central as they are affected by, and entail elements of, the other two levels of partnership interactions. This is due to the fact that the individual adheres to their professional identity (Evans 1997) and secondly, due to the dominance of one profession within each LSCB partner organisation. Indeed, all the principal professionals involved in children’s safeguard partnerships sit at the very core of their wider organisations, numerically, substantively and operationally (i.e. without teachers, there cannot be an education sector, and without nurses, hospitals lose operational purpose).

Applying Hakim’s (1993) thresholds to UK welfare professions, official government statistics

show that the strongest ‘gender bias’ exists in the nursing profession, with nearly 90 per cent of the qualifying nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff being women, and only 10 per cent men (DoH 2013). The bias is even clearer amongst nurses working with children: 96 per cent are women (ibid.). In social work, children’s services and adult services workers are not too dissimilar where gender distribution is concerned: 83 to 82 per cent female social workers respectively (Hussein 2009, based on NMDS-SC May 2009; HSCIC 2013), therefore both showing clear gender dominance. A similar situation is noted in primary education, where teachers are predominantly women and men represent only 17 per cent of the workforce although they go up to a 30-percent figure for nursery and primary school heads (DfES 2011). The DfES (2011) statistics reveal a slightly more balanced, although still female dominated, picture amongst secondary school teachers (61 per cent female). However, at school head teacher level, men are the majority of secondary school heads -70 percent- however, not crossing the 75 per cent threshold to becoming a male-concentrated professional category. A profession that appears unequivocally male-dominated is that of police officers, with almost three times as many male police officers as female officers in England and Wales (Home Office 2013). The picture for general medical practice seems overall more gender-balanced: 47 per cent of the GP doctors were female in 2012 (DoH 2013), and given the upward trajectory from 35.3 per cent in 2002 (ibid) to 40 per cent in 2005 (DoH 2005) to the 2012 figures, it is conceivable that female GP doctors will soon cross the 55 per cent threshold to form a female-dominated profession. Overall then, the key ECM professions are significantly gender imbalanced. Although some professions are not explicitly mentioned here - for example, health visitors- they are still included in our analysis through their ‘root’ professions (nursing, in the case of health visitors).

## **Discussion**

Our exploration of partnership working took place in a policy sphere that incorporates gendered organisations and professions, all collaborating on a gendered policy area. Following our

analysis of secondary data about the partners, it appears that our ‘gender hypothesis’ to partnership failure, and indirectly, to policy failure, may be relevant to most welfare partnerships, in the UK as well as beyond. Indeed, our analysis indicated that the issues which led to perceived (at least) policy failure in child protection are due to persistent miscommunication between culturally dissonant organisations, formed around traditional, gendered professions. These issues are not specific to a particular national and political culture, but are rather universal, in that welfare professions are traditional and therefore likely to be gendered everywhere in the world. Although democratic processes may play a role in ameliorating the gendered disposition of welfare professions, complex institutional matrixes are a powerful force in maintaining the ‘old professionalism’ (see, for example, Henricksson et al., 2006).

That most welfare professions are ‘feminine’ in their gender composition and discourse, and deal with policy issues perceived to be ‘women’s issues’, makes the position of the masculine professions non-dominant in the collaborative work for children and families. However, the role of male dominated professions, such as police and medicine, is essential to the aims of the ECM policy which designates them as key statutory partners, and that makes action necessary in this field. This is all the more important as the most recent UK serious case reviews (centralised by the NSPCC on their website) raise serious concerns over the fact that male members of families are overlooked by professional investigations.

Gender segregation, as well as the implication that it could act as a barrier to inter-professional and inter-organisational collaboration, has been rehearsed by Kneale (1994), Leathard (1994) and Hall (2005). However, this has been limited both in scope and depth of analysis. Kneale (1994) raised the potential effects of discrimination on working together effectively, but did not engage any empirical data, while Leathard (1994) mentioned gender, albeit in passing, as a barrier to the collaboration between health and social workers. Hall (2005, p. 189) addressed the issue of gender in more detail, claiming that the historical development of gender and social class issues have informed the ways in which professional cultures evolved and, later, the ‘friction and conflict that has



existed between professionals until present day'. However, all three authors took a theoretical, rather than empirical perspective, on such issues, perhaps reinforcing Gherardi's (1995, p. 15) observation that gender is difficult to identify clearly in practice, despite the perception that our direct experience tells us that organisational cultures ... are strongly "gendered." Our paper has developed this body of work by taking an empirical direction where the 'gender' dimension emerged naturally from the data initially collected to observe partnership working in the English LSCBs. It is through this contribution to literature that we aim to further the conversation about 'hidden', cultural barriers to inter-professional collaborations (Molyneux 2001, Hall 2005, Gittel et al. 2013). Indeed, our findings suggest that, in public sector welfare partnerships, gender is one such 'hidden' barrier, therefore ultimately endangering the ECM policy.

The core of our 'gender hypothesis' is that occupational gender segregation as a potent barrier to collaborative work by enhancing cultural dissonance between the professions involved. In advancing this hypothesis, we respond directly to Carey and Dickinson's (2015) concern with the two major 'silences' that exist in recent public administration scholarship- first, around gender equity in the public service workforce and secondly, around the role of feminist theories in tackling contemporary public management challenges. This gender hypothesis reverses the 'invisibility' of gender as a contributory factor to many public administration and policy dilemmas, including around collaborative, boundary-spanning and skills requirements for future public administrators (O'Flynn 2013).

## **Concluding remarks**

Our findings contribute directly to the literature on partnership working, indirectly to that of policy failure and, more widely, to a less coordinated, indeed emergent, body of work on professional and organisational traditionalism (e.g. Halford and Leonard, 2001). In considering factors which may lead to failure, whether 'outright', 'conflicted', or 'tolerable' (McConnell, 2015), professional traditionalism was seen to be holding inter-agency mandatory projects such as the English LSCBs to

failure. In our study, we saw this to be at least partially due to the disruptive role of gendered interactions in the creation of a cultural melting pot of professional cultures contributing jointly to a policy outcome which exceeds the individual expertise of any one profession.

The case we have considered – that of the LSCB inter-professional and inter-organisational partnership – is significant in that it brings together professions which are long established – hence ‘traditional’ – and which appear to be gender-segregated. The argument we advanced is that occupational gender segregation can jeopardize effective communication by reinforcing traditional boundaries between the core agencies involved in service delivery. In building this argument, we looked at inter-professional aspects of partnership work and concluded that gender dominance in the welfare professions could explain the persistent failure of communication between professionals working for children and families in England and Wales. This is an important issue that transcends national as well as policy realm boundaries, as welfare professions are traditional establishments in many countries and policy realms.

It is important to engage further with such ‘traditionalism’ by way of persistent gender segregation within welfare professions, in the context of the more ‘contemporary’ reality of partnership working. On a practical level, balancing the gender composition of welfare profession and organisations is worth pursuing alongside institutional reform (such as ECM) if the goals of partnership working are to be achieved as these are highly dependent on cultural integration. Maintaining occupational segregation adds another level of risk to an already fragile framework of child-welfare service provision. It would appear incongruous, therefore, not to pursue further exploration of the gender variable in organisational and professional cultures if the goal of more effective collaboration (in this case, for the critical aim of child safety) is to be achieved. Therefore, the steps already taken by the government to address historically poor, inter-agency communication (see, for example, DoH 1991), via the introduction of the statutory duty to collaborate, is insufficient. That mandated partnerships are not a panacea to persistent collaboration problems has also been raised by Barton and Quinn (2001) as well as that they should at best be complemented by other

policies –our suggestion for LSCBs is policies aimed at reducing the substantive gender gaps within and between traditional welfare professions.

Future research may find ways to further substantiate the evidence presented here by adding more empirical weight to the claims in this specific, as well as other, policy areas and partnerships that might well reveal similar gender dissonance and thus gaps in communication and collaboration. Gender is a generally poorly explored dimension of the dissonance that, if properly addressed, has the potential to make a measurable improvement to the effectiveness of local policy delivery for children. We believe that, given a similar fragility in many other multi-agency partnerships, critically exploring gender as a significant factor has the potential to bring improvements in other policy collaborations. Yet there may be other ‘hidden’ variables which might help elucidate persistent failure in the work of welfare partnerships like the LSCBs. Finally, the research on organisations has progressed to reveal a widening gap between the *modus operandi* and the assumptions behind traditional and ‘newer’ organisations; what we have witnessed in the LSCBs may well be a manifestation of tensions arising from that gap. Finally, we contend that amassing more observations of traditional ‘baggage’ in contemporary working modes for public service delivery will assist in improving policy collaboration.

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Annex: Gender data occurrence from the case study

Source of data	Respondent / in relation to whom was it observed	Emergent occurrence or prompted by interviewer	Data
Interviews	Social worker, male	Emergent	The interviewee offered the example of a meeting where the police officer (male) asked to make him a cup of tea.
	Police officer, female	Emergent	The police officer commented on the non-t... claiming that she needed to 'take a stand' a... culture in her department. She then moved... moving up in the ranks and that she was gla... to make a difference for children in the com... colleagues were not particularly interested... 'masculine'
	Head teacher, male	Prompted	This interviewee thought gender might be a... but that it was too much of a 'personal' cha... management purposes
	Youth worker, woman	Prompted	This interviewee thought gender used to be... that it was no longer the case as the profess...
	Nurse, female	Prompted	This interviewee agreed that gender is an is... between professionals, but could not think...

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Ethnographic observation (LSCB meetings)	Police officer, female	Emergent	Amongst the four police representatives to LSCB boards, the only one perceived by LSCB as a woman and one who was openly critical of mainstream police work.
	Social worker (social care), female	Emergent	The only social care representative who was seen as a female social worker who was seen as a 'feminine' culture of her organisation
	Social worker (LSCB chair), male	Emergent	The only LSCB chair whose leadership was grounded in being too 'firm'

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